

Will Byers has a...Girlfriend?! by inazuma_hunter

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Summary:

When Will gets a girlfriend, Mike's world starts turning upside down. Will had always been by Mike's side, but now that he isn't as much anymore, Mike starts to wonder if the feelings he thought were best friend feelings are maybe something more. But is it too late to do anything about it?

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

So, I really wanted to do some trope breaking for this fic.

The characters are in Senior year of high school.

I know next to nothing about D&D and won't be fixing any inaccuracies, the scene below was just twisted to fit my needs (sorry).

I drew a lot of inspiration for this fic from another fic on this site titled "There's a Starman Waiting in the Sky". It's one of the best Byler fics ever, if you haven't read it, go do so immediately!

Mike Wheeler stared across the table, his lips curling into a smug smile at the worried look on his best friend's face. He had him just where he wanted him; he had fallen right into his trap. Will Byers looked up in time to catch the smirk look on Mike's face and glared.

"This isn't over yet Wheeler!"

"Just about," Mike said confidently, sliding him the 20-sided die. "The Tarrasque can't be destroyed, Will, and you're right in the middle of its lair. You need to roll a 19 or higher just to do enough damage to allow your party to escape certain destruction."

Mike had spent quite a bit of time crafting this particular campaign, most of it on perfectly disguising the location of the big boss that was now threatening the destruction of the party. Will had been pretty good at detecting all of Mike's traps the past couple of times the group had gotten together to play D&D, so Mike had changed up his patterns a bit, hoping to catch Will off guard - and it had gone brilliantly.

But Will wasn't quite ready to just give up. The brown-haired teen picked up the die with a determined look on his face. "Well, I guess I'll just have to roll a 19 or higher then." He shook the die in his hand and cocked his arm, but just as he was ready to release it, a female voice piped in.

"Wiiilllll, wait."

Will paused, eying the pretty blonde girl sitting on his right. "Kiss for good luck?" she asked sweetly, tilting her head slightly. Will blushed all the way to the top of his ears.

"Jessicaaa," he protested, darting looks all around the table, gauging his friends' reaction.

"Shut up and do it Will," Lucas commanded. "It worked last week when you had to roll a high number."

"Oh my God, really? That was only a coincidence, just roll the die already." Dustin groaned. He didn't really mind though. He was just upset they were about to lose.

"Dustin, I'd kiss Will myself if I thought it would help us out of this mess. Now hurry up and do it Will," Lucas repeated.

Will sighed and leaned over, quickly pecking his girlfriend on the lips. Mike, who had been watching the scene with silent amusement, felt his stomach swoop slightly at the sight, but he immediately pushed the feeling away. "Can we go now?" Dustin grumbled.

"Yes, we can go now *Dusty*," Jessica said, smiling. Dustin couldn't help but to break the glower on his face and sigh in resignation. Will once again shook the die, this time letting it fly. The whole table fell into a hush as it skittered across the table top, finally settling right before it flew off the edge.

"No fucking way," Mike broke through the silence before the rest of the table erupted around him.

"A 20!! You fucking did it!" Lucas exclaimed.

"I take back everything I said Jessica, you're the best!" Dustin put in.

"Not over yet boys, everyone retreat," she replied, grinning smugly in Mike's direction, who was still a bit stunned at the die roll. The party hastily began its retreat away from the lair of the Tarrasque, with Jessica's druid character expertly laying down defense spells behind them to ensure their escape. Once they had made it to safety, the

correct path was easy to pick out, and twenty minutes later the group was celebrating victory, having made it to the end of Mike's adventure.

"Damn, that was a close one. Excellent campaign though Wheeler, super fun!" Dustin bubbled as he packed up his things to leave. He had explained to them earlier that his mom wanted him home right after the campaign tonight.

"You outta here too Lucas?" Mike asked, noting the boy had stood up along with Dustin.

"Yeah, I'm meeting up with Max. I promised her if we got done early enough, we'd catch a movie," he replied, glancing at his watch. "Looks like we have time to make the 11:00."

Max and Eleven had tried but failed to get into D&D with the rest of the Party. Max ended up thinking it was just a tad too nerdy for her, while Eleven didn't understand why her mage character couldn't just blast away all the enemies in site every time.

"It's what I would do in real life, why should I have to roll for it?" she asked bewildered. No amount of explaining could satisfy her, so she had decided that this just wasn't the pastime for her.

After Dustin and Lucas had said goodbye and left, Will and Jessica stayed to help clean up Mike's basement, which was in a state of disarray after being home to five teenagers for the better part of the day. When the board and game pieces were put away, and the empty soda cans and snack wrappers had been cleared away, Mike turned to Will, who was standing closest to him.

"What about you guys, special plans for the night?"

"Uh, yeah, kinda," Will replied. "We're going stargazing. There's supposed to be a meteor shower just after midnight."

Mike nodded. He remembered hearing about it on the news, with forecasters saying that the weather in Hawkins would be perfect for it.

"Hey, you should come with us Mike," Jessica said excitedly as she

came and stood next to Will.

"Uhhh, I don't know," Mike hesitated. "That sounds kinda romantic. I don't wanna be the third wheel and get in your way."

Maybe if he had still been dating Eleven, Mike would've felt differently. Hell, if he had any girlfriend at all, it would've made for a perfect double date scenario. But he and Eleven had broken up years ago, and right now, Mike Wheeler was quite single.

"Nonsense, Will and I can swap spit anytime," Jessica replied matter-of-factly. "We're going out to watch the stars, not suck face. Besides, we've hardly seen you at all this week until today's campaign. We wanna spend time with you."

And that was the thing - Mike actually believed her. During the past couple months, she had become more than just 'Will's girlfriend'. She and Mike had actually become really good friends, even outside of hanging out with Will. The first time was when she had asked to come over and study for Mr. Conrad's history test, a class she and Mike shared, but none of the rest of the Party was in. Mike was a little taken aback.

"Ummmm, sure, that's okay I guess. What time will you guys be over?"

"Sorry Mike, I can't make it," Will had answered. "My chore list around the house is piling up, and I promised mom I'd get to them today."

"Looks like it's just you and me then Mike! I'll be over at 6." She kissed Will on the cheek and bounced away before Mike could say anything, leaving he and Will alone outside the school. As soon as she was out of sight, Mike had turned to his friend apologetically.

"Sorry Will, I didn't know you were busy tonight or I wouldn't have agreed. I'll call her and cancel, tell her something came up."

"Why would you do that?" Will asked, looking puzzled.

"Uh, maybe 'cause that's your GIRLFRIEND, dude!" Mike said, exasperated. "You really want her over at some other guy's house

studying alone?"

Will had just laughed. "Of course I don't. But you're not just 'some other guy', Mike. You're my best friend. Are you planning on putting moves on my girl, Wheeler?"

"What!? Of course not, I wouldn't do that," Mike spluttered in reply.

"Exactly," Will said calmly. "I trust you more than anyone, Mike. I also trust her. You're two of the closest people in the world to me, I know you wouldn't hurt me. And I want you guys to be friends, you know? It's important to me that you like each other."

Mike had sighed but relented, still uneasy about the whole thing. But when Jessica had shown up later that night, everything actually went really well. There was no awkwardness or weird tension. It was like they'd been friends for years. Not to mention, they had both aced their history exam the next day.

"Come on, say you'll come, please?" Jessica asked again, snapping Mike out of his thoughts and back to the present. Mike looked over at Will pleadingly, but he took the same line as his girlfriend.

"Yeah Mike, come out with us," he said softly, giving Mike his impossibly gentle Will Byers smile. "High school is almost over. Who knows how many more nights we'll all have to hang out like this."

Mike took a look at the two hopeful faces in front of him before throwing his arms up in resignation. "Alright, alright, you guys win, I'll come."

"Yay!" Jessica squeaked excitedly, eliciting a smile from both boys. They gathered up a few blankets and headed out the back door, deciding to make the short trek to an empty field about a mile away, escaping the light pollution of the city.

"Okay, you're in the middle Mike. You can be the barrier in case Will decides to get handsy," she continued jokingly, earning a scoff from her boyfriend and a smirk from Mike. "Alright now, it's dark out, can't have anyone getting separated. Hands!"

The blonde took Mike's left hand in her own as they walked. "You too

boys! Safety first."

Will laughed brilliantly as he nonchalantly took Mike's right hand in his own. "Sorry Wheeler, you heard the lady," he said, giving Mike's hand a playful squeeze.

"Now, onward lads!" Jessica called out playfully.

That swoopy feeling in Mike's stomach returned with a vengeance as he struggled to fight it off for the second time that night. By the time they reached their destination, he had thankfully gotten it back under control. He and Will found a nice level spot of ground and started to spread out the blankets. Once they were done, he noticed the pair looking expectantly at him.

"What? Me in the middle again?" he guessed.

"Well yeah, you're the biggest," Jessica replied as he took his spot, laying down flat on his back to gaze up at the stars.

"Plus," Will put in playfully as he lay down on the left, his head now positioned on Mike's left shoulder, "now we have somewhere comfortable to rest our heads."

Jessica giggled as she laid on Mike's right, taking his other shoulder for herself.

"Wow. Wow!" Mike exclaimed, his voice thick with fake betrayal. "It all comes out now. The real reason you guys invited me out here. Is that all I am to you? A glorified pillow?"

Pleasant reverberations coursed through Mike's body as the couple chuckled at his theatrics. "Of course not Mike...that's not all you are to us. Just what your primary function is at the moment," Will said cheekily.

The taller boy looked over at his friend who was struggling to keep from letting lose a new round of laughter at his own comments. "Okay Byers, I see how it is," he said, jostling his shoulder around, nearly causing the younger boy's head roll off of it. Will giggled but managed to keep his place, and before things could escalate further, Jessica cut in.

"Enough horseplay you two, it's starting!" she said excitedly.

And so it was. Mike turned his eyes back skyward and was rewarded with an innumerable amount of shooting stars streaking across the sky, silvery tails flowing behind them.

"Whoa, awesome," he whispered breathlessly. He heard Will hum in agreement before the trio fell silent, watching the spectacular show above them. But even with all of nature's glory unfolding in the heavens, Mike felt his thoughts being drawn back once again to the subject that he had been spending a lot of time thinking about the past few months. A certain person who, no matter how hard Mike tried, kept coming back to the forefront of his mind. Even though he knew he shouldn't be thinking about them in that manner, because this person was in a relationship...a happy relationship. And Mike didn't want to ruin that...did he?

But try as he might, he couldn't help himself from subtly turning his head and glancing at the profile of the person laying on his shoulder....his left shoulder. Will's face was handsome under normal circumstances. But out here, bathed in moonlight, his softened features in awe of the show going on overhead - he was downright breathtaking. And there it was...for the third time that night. The feeling of butterflies growing in Mike's stomach. This time though, he didn't push them away. He didn't pretend that they weren't there, or attribute them to something else. No, this time he just stared at his best friend's gentle face and admitted the truth to himself - he had somehow fallen for Will Byers.

Mike suddenly felt eyes watching him and he turned back to his right to see Jessica staring at him curiously.

Shit....did she see him staring at Will? Did she know? Had she figured him out?

Apparently not, because all she did was smile sweetly before screaming out the next asteroid. "Look at that one it's the best one yet!" she declared. "Make a wish, boys!"

And so Mike did...even though he knew it had no hope of actually coming true.

Notes for the Chapter:

I know I was supposed to post this earlier in the week, but the more I stared at it, the more i didn't really like it lol. I'm hoping it was just a case of staring too long and nitpicking. Let me know your thoughts below, and if you'd want to see more.

Next chapter could go up fairly quickly (you'll get some background info on Jessica's intro to the group), but after that I have no idea for the update schedule.

2. Chapter 2

Jessica Thompson made an immediate splash three months ago when she transferred into Hawkins High School halfway through senior year. Yes, most new kids attract a certain amount of attention, especially if you're transferring in the middle of the year, and even more so if that year happens to be your last year of high school...but that wasn't the half of it. She was hot. Like, super hot. Like, she immediately shot to the top of the school rankings, even surpassing Jennifer Hayes in a lot of people's minds.

She had it all - the blonde, cool, California girl vibe, super pretty face, dazzling blue eyes, and her figure....well, let's just say she turned heads nearly every time she walked by. The problem with being that hot in a new school though was it seemed to intimidate a lot of people. Thus, she spent the first few days eating lunch by herself over in the corner of the cafeteria. All of the girls seemed just the least bit jealous, and the boys seemed scared shitless to go up and speak to her.

And that's why it was so shocking for the rest of the Party the next day when Will Byers of all people showed up to the table with the new girl in tow.

"Hey guys, this is Jessica. I told her she could eat lunch with us. Is that cool?"

Now Mike had grown up a lot over the past couple of years. He still really didn't like new people trying to join the group, but he wasn't going to be outright hostile about it like he used to be. He'd just talk to Will in private later and try to discourage it.

"Of course, have a seat," is all he said aloud.

Will made introductions, and Jessica quickly fell in to easy conversation with the group. Apparently she and Will had art class together, Will complimented the piece that Jessica was working on, and they quickly made friends.

And as the convo went on, it readily became clear that making

friends was something that Jessica was *very* good at, given a chance. She was smart, nice, had a sharp sense of humor, and seemed to be able to talk to each Party member about anything. She talked to Eleven about the latest fashion trends and make up. And while she wasn't a skateboarder, she was a surfer, and she was able to make common ground with Max on that and reminiscing about California together.

She then easily followed along with the boys' discussion on the latest X-men comic, and even brought up some very good points that they hadn't yet considered. And when she admitted that she was a pretty decent D&D player back in California, Mike was on the verge of maybe even begrudgingly accepting that Jessica might make a nice permanent addition to their lunch table...and that's when Troy showed up, followed by several of his flunkies.

Troy had been among the rest of the guys at Hawkins High who were afraid to make the first move with Jessica, even though he was a self-proclaimed ladies' man. But apparently seeing someone else break the ice with her had emboldened him to make his run now.

"Hello there, beautiful, my name is Troy," he said, rudely cutting off Will in the middle of a sentence.

Jessica looked at him a bit confused before responding with a big smile. "Hello Troy, if you're referring to me, my name is Jessica."

"Jessica, Jessica, of course. So, Jessica, why are you over here sitting with the fairy squad?"

Mike scowled and was about to tell Troy to fuck off, but the blonde beat him to the punch.

"If you mean the fine people at this table, it's because they were the first ones to invite me over, and I've taken quite a liking to them actually."

"Well it's not too late babe. Ditch this fag," he spat, looking directly at Will, "and come hang out with a real man."

This drew chuckles from his followers, and the whole lunchroom was

now watching the scene play out. Jessica smiled brightly and stood up, and for a second, Mike thought she was going to just walk off with Troy. Instead, she made a big show of looking around, craning her neck trying to see past the bully, and then finally fixing him with a look of confusion. "Real man? Are you going to introduce me to him? Is it one of your friends here?"

"Wh-what?" Troy stuttered, his confidence totally shaken. "No, I-I meant, um, I was talking about mys-" he cut himself off as he finally realized her implication, his face turning red as the whole lunchroom started laughing at him. She probably could've let it end there and he would've been on his way, but instead she decided to finish him off.

"I don't like bullies, Troy, that's middle school bullshit. You're almost an adult now, it's time to act like one. Bullies are tired and played out....and the vast majority of them are just trying to overcompensate for their small dicks. So no thanks, not interested, on *any* level. Bye!"

Troy's following immediately dispersed after that comment, not wanting to be lumped into *that* particular category. That left the boy standing there alone, red-faced and spluttering. He muttered something under his breath before running out of the cafeteria to hoots and catcalls. Jessica sat back down, glancing at the stunned looks on the rest of the party's faces with amusement before turning back to Will, and continuing their conversation as if nothing had happened. And that's how it came to be that Jessica became a regular part of the Party's lunch table.

It became apparent over the next couple of weeks that Will was hanging out with Jessica outside of school as well. He declined a Party get together at the arcade, saying the pair had an art project to work on for class. Next it was he couldn't make it to the movies because Jessica was helping him refine his portfolio he was putting together for college. Normally this might've annoyed Mike, but lately Will seemed so much happier than usual, like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

Which made sense when Mike thought about it. Finally having someone his own age to talk to about art stuff was a brand new feeling for Will. Don't get him wrong, Mike had happily listened to his fair share of Will's musings on paints and charcoals, and had tried

his best to hold his own in the conversation (after all, if it was important to Will, it was important to Mike) but at the end of the day, he fell flat. He knew Will appreciated his effort, but having someone that actually *knew* what they were talking about was likely worlds better. So that's what Mike attributed the pair's friendship to - until three weeks later, when Jessica and Will showed up at the lunch table holding hands.

Eleven and Max shared a small smirk as the pair sat down, while Dustin's eyes were nearly bugging out of his head, and Lucas' jaw was hanging open. And as for Mike, he had the unfortunate timing of taking a long swig of milk at just the wrong moment. The rest of the table ducked and cursed as the beverage shot out of Mike's nose and mouth. Will immediately rushed over and handed him a napkin, worriedly rubbing circles into the choking boy's back, while the rest of them just laughed or looked at Mike with disgust.

"Well, guess I'm done with lunch now," Max said stoically, discarding the rest of her now slightly damp sandwich back into her paper bag. Mike, finally having recovered, apologized profusely before turning back to Will who had now taken a seat at the table with Jessica.

"Soooo...." Lucas said dramatically, "as Mike's reaction kinda broke the ice, is there something you two wanna tell us?"

Will looked slightly uncomfortable, blushing a bit, but Jessica simply retook his hand, holding them above the table for all to see. "Will and I are dating now!" she said proudly, giving the back of his hand a kiss.

"Oh my god, that's god damn adorable," Dustin cooed, making Will blush deeper. "Congrats you guys."

Lucas, Max, and El all echoed that sentiment, with a shy Will thanking them. The boy's hazel eyes finally locked onto Mike, waiting for him to say something. Hell, *Mike* was waiting for Mike to say something, but he suddenly found himself frozen. This shouldn't have been that shocking. A boy and girl become friends, notice they have a lot of similar interests, start spending time together, and finally decide to date. It wasn't an unusual progression for most people - but Will wasn't most people.

And that was the thing that got Mike. This was Will Byers, who had never shown any confidence at all around girls. Will Byers who never had shown even the slightest *interest* in girls in a romantic fashion. Will Byers who never talked about his crushes and always brushed off the subject with a nervous laugh whenever it came up. Will Byers...who Mike had come to believe might be gay, and was just waiting for him to come out to the Party and admit it (Mike would've fully and fiercely supported him of course). Yes that Will Byers had just landed the hottest girl at school as his first girlfriend ever.

Mike suddenly realized he hadn't said anything, and that all eyes were now on him. "Yeah, congrats Will," he said smiling. "You too Jessica, this is great news."

"Right?" she said cheerfully, nestling just a bit closer to Will. Mike had an uneasy feeling in his stomach. He didn't know what it was, but he didn't think this relationship was going to last very long. This was Will's first girlfriend, and a girl that looked like Jessica looked must certainly be more...experienced. He just didn't want Will to get hurt. So he stayed ready and vigilant, prepared to pick up the pieces if need be.

Turns out though that in this case, Mike Wheeler was wrong - very wrong. Will and Jessica were almost a perfect couple. They looked nice together, complemented each other well, but were never annoying like other couples might be with excessive displays of PDA. They held hands a lot, cuddled, and there were occasional kisses on the cheek or a peck on the lips, but that was about it. In fact, Mike had only seen it go farther than that once, and that was entirely his own fault.

He had gone over to meet Will one Saturday at his house to work on an English project. They had agreed to meet up at 3p.m., but Mike, as he always did, showed up early. So when he breezed in the door at about 2:40 without bothering to knock (the Byers house was his second home, he hadn't knocked for years, why would he start now) he had no one to blame but himself when he got an eyeful of Jessica's tongue down Will's throat, and Will's hand groping under her shirt.

Mike had immediately spluttered out an apology and ran back out the door, his face on fire and his thoughts consumed with how

awkward it was going to be to look either of them in the eye for awhile. But the couple followed him outside, after a few moments of putting themselves back together. And while Will looked as red as Mike did, Jessica basically laughed it off.

"You're lucky you came when you did Mike," she said. "A few minutes later and you might've seen more of your best friend here than you'd ever care to."

"Ha! Right!" Mike scoffed, trying to regain some semblance of composure. "Will and I have been best friends since kindergarten. Do you know how many gym classes we've had together? You don't think I've ever seen him naked? "

"Oh, I'm sure you have," she replied mischievously. "But this time I think a certain part of his anatomy might've been in an....altered state that you surely haven't seen it in."

"Wow, okay, gross Jessica, you win. You can stop now, tha-"

"And believe me Mike, you wouldn't have been able to miss it, if you know what I mean."

"JESSICA!" both Will and Mike screamed at her in unison. It was hard to tell which of them was more red, but the girl just cackled to herself with glee. The two boys finally made eye contact before bursting out laughing themselves, the awkwardness of the situation totally gone.

So yeah....the relationship had not only lasted, it had thrived. And that's how on this particular Saturday, one week after the stargazing event, Mike found himself rolling through the suburbs to pick up Jessica. Today was a very special day - Will's birthday. Will's *eighteenth* birthday. There was to be a party later that night at the Byers house, but first things first, Mike still didn't have a gift for Will. Part of that was by design though. He and Jessica had decided to pool their money to buy Will something really nice, and this morning was the first moment when their schedules lined up so they were both free.

Mike pulled up outside the simple yet attractive one-story house and

gave a honk, (which was actually quite unnecessary since anyone could hear Mike's hand-me-down station wagon coming from a mile away). As he waited for Jessica to come out, his thoughts wandered back to Will. He had been acting kind of weird all week at school. A little distant, but not super noticeable. Well, not noticeable to anyone besides Mike that is. He had asked Will if something was bothering him, but Will just smiled and said his classes this week were stressful. Mike had let it go, but still...

"Hey, what's up Wheelie Boy?" Jessica called out, breaking into Mike's thoughts as she trotted out of her house, her lips tilted in a grin.

"Not much, Jess, not much at all," Mike replied with a laugh. She had grown fond of that nickname, especially when she found out that Mike didn't really like it all that much. He had tried to discourage it, come up with nicknames for her to combat it, but all of his attempts had failed. Besides, the damn thing had kinda grown on him a bit.

"You ready for this? We have to pick out the perfect gift for our boy! After all, he deserves nothing but the best." she said, sliding into the car.

Our boy.

Mike grinned wryly at the phrasing before pulling away from the curb. "Indeed he does. So, how much do you have to spend?"

"Not as much as I'd like," she admitted wistfully. "I've got about \$50."

"No sweat," he replied. "If I match it, we should be able to find something pretty nice for him."

Ten minutes later they were pulling into the mall parking lot, where the duo made a beeline to the arts and crafts store. "Let's split up and look around, see if anything jumps out," Mike suggested. Jessica nodded and headed off to the left side of the store which carried the painting supplies. Truth is, Mike already had a pretty good idea of what he wanted to get Will, as he made his way to the drawing section. After all, he had been here plenty of times with Will before Jessica came around.

It wasn't his favorite thing to do, but he always enjoyed seeing his friend's face light up looking at all of the fancy supplies. But he could never really afford to buy anything on the high end of things, usually settling for the generic brand or whatever was on sale. Mike had offered more than once to chip in to buy something better.

"It's not like I'm really buying it only for you, I'd benefit from it too," he had tried to argue. "I love the things you draw for our campaigns and you never let us help out."

But his efforts were always met with, "That's sweet Mike, but I'm fine with this." Will was always thankful but insistent, determined not to accept what he thought of as charity from anyone. In a way, it made Mike respect him all the more, but it was also quite frustrating. But today was his chance to fix all that. One couldn't refuse a gift on their birthday after all, so Mike was going to make sure that Will got what he truly deserved.

He carefully picked up the art case that he had seen Will admire on more than one occasion. It was a beautiful set with a full complement of high-quality colored pens and colored pencils, along with a couple of calligraphy pens thrown in as well. All of that was well and fine, but in Mike's opinion the true value of the set was in the carrying case itself. It was a genuine cherry wood case, beautifully carved, with a little bronze plaque on the top of it for engraving.

The case was normally \$200, which meant it was way out of Will's price range. But, as Mike looked today, luck would have it that the set was on sale. It was still \$150 though. Mike sighed. Jessica only had \$50 to spend. That in itself was no problem - Mike wouldn't have any problem at all fronting the rest of the money himself. He had never really had an issue with having disposable income, as his parents were pretty generous with allowance as long as he kept his grades up. But he *knew* Jessica wouldn't be okay with it. She'd either suggest something cheaper, or worry endlessly about paying Mike back for the rest of her share. Neither option was appealing to the raven-haired teen, so he carefully began to formulate a plan.

"No luck," Jessica frowned as she met him back in the middle of the store. "Everything is either too expensive or not nice enough to - hey, what you got there?"

Mike proudly handed over the art set, watching as the blonde's brow furrowed. "Mike, this is gorgeous...but how much is it? You know we're on a budget..."

"That's the best part, it's on sale," Mike replied. "Marked down to \$100. Must be fate, the stars aligning and what not." He thought he had done a relatively good job in schooling his face into something resembling earnestness, but Jessica, sharp as always, apparently noticed something.

"Mike....what aren't you telling me? How much is it really?"

Mike had been prepared for this too though, so he let out a long sigh, as if he'd been caught. "Fine, you win. It's actually going to be \$120 after the engraving," he said, tapping the little plaque. "But you know, it's his 18th birthday! I wanna do something special for him. So what if I put an extra \$20 in, who cares?"

She still looked unsure and Mike was afraid she was going to refuse, but she relented in the end. "Alright, but you have to let me buy the card at least then."

"Deal," Mike smiled warmly. "I'll get this engraved while you go pick out a card. Meet you at the food court?"

Jessica hummed an acknowledgement, handing over her \$50 to Mike before exiting to head to the Hallmark store. The boy let out a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding. It had worked! This was gonna be Will's best birthday ever.

"I *still* can't believe the price we got on that thing," Jessica said, popping a french fry into her mouth. "That's like a crazy good deal."

Mike finished chewing his mouthful of food before smiling from across the table at her. "Guess the universe finally decided to give Will Byers a break for once."

"For once?" Jessica asked sharply. "What am I then? Chopped liver?"

"What? Oh! No, I didn't mean it like that," Mike explained hurriedly. "You're like the best thing that's happened to Will, and -"

He was cut off by a snort and laugh from the blonde girl across from him. "Chill out Wheelie Boy, I was just messing with you," she said, her eyes sparkling mischievously. "Besides...I'm not the only good thing that's happened in Will's life you know?"

Mike raised an inquiring eyebrow at her causing her to sigh. "You, stupid. I'm talking about you. I hope you know how much you mean to Will."

"Of course," Mike replied, trying to stave down the blush heading towards his cheeks. "We're best friends after all."

Jessica just shook her head firmly. "No, that's not all Mike. I mean there's best friends, and then there's *best friends*. Will hasn't told me exactly what sort of...trauma he went through back in middle school. And I expect he has his reasons for keeping it secret. What he has told me though was just how much you did for him. That you were there before, during, and after, never leaving his side. He credits you with his recovery, you know? He says he wouldn't have made it without you, and...he feels bad sometimes that he can't put how much it meant to him into words. That he hasn't conveyed to you just how much -"

"I'd do it all again," Mike cut in. "In a second. He means a lot to me too....so much."

Mike stopped himself there, not wanting to risk betraying what he had *really* been feeling for his best friend lately. Jessica just nodded in response, but her smile was still sad. "Is...is there something else?" Mike asked nervously. The blonde didn't answer right away, biting her lip as if debating whether or not to say anything. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but...Will is just so nervous about telling you himself."

"What? Come on, Jess...if this is about Will...please, tell me." Mike could see her arguing with herself before finally sighing in defeat.

"Well...it's about college."

"Oh?" Mike had not been expecting that. Finals were coming up next month. He and Will had been planning for the past couple of years to

go to NYU, Mike in the engineering program, and Will to the art program. They had both applied early and been granted early acceptance, provided their remaining high school work went well. Jessica, on the other hand, was heading back to California for college, having been accepted to UCLA. Mike had often wondered how she and Will were going to make their relationship work from across the country, but hadn't said anything about it to him. It wasn't really his place to.

"In addition to being accepted to NYU, Will also applied to the art program at UCLA. It's super competitive, and he didn't really think he had a chance, but he got in! He really wants to accept it, he loves their art program a lot...plus you know, he also wants to stay close to me, as 3,000 miles would put in a kink in any relationship. But...he's scared of what you'll say. You mean so much to him, and he doesn't want to hurt you. He knows you've been planning to go to college together for years and..."

Mike tuned out the rest of what she's saying. He's utterly devastated. Of course he was. Even if he *hadn't* recently discovered he had a crush on his best friend....it's still his *best friend*. Spending four years with the whole country between them, Mike didn't know if he could bear it. And who knew! People made all sorts of plans after college. They could both get good job offers in their respective states and never hardly see each other again except for holidays and -

"Mike....Mike? You still there?" Jessica asked concerned, cutting into Mike's spiraling thoughts.

Mike shook it off and smiled ruefully. "So is this why he's been acting weird all week?"

The blonde looked a bit surprised as she responded. "Yeah, he found out Monday and has been struggling with what to do. I thought he was hiding it pretty well though, I'm surprised you noticed."

"Of course I noticed," Mike scoffed. "I always notice when something is up with Will. Um, or, you know any of my friends."

She nodded carefully before her next question. "So...are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah, totally. I'm fine it, uh, just stings a little. Stings a lot actually. But I'm proud of Will for getting in to UCLA, I really am. And happy for you guys. If that's what he wants, then I'm...I'm all for it." He paused to take a drink of his soda before clearing his throat and continuing. "Thank you for giving me a heads up though. When Will tells me, I don't want to show any emotion that would discourage him from doing what he wants. At least I'll be prepared now."

Jessica let out a long breath before fixing Mike with a fond smile. "You're a really good friend, Wheeler, you know that?"

Mike smiled in reply before taking another bite of his now flavorless burger. "But am I?" he thought to himself as just the tiniest feelings of jealousy and bitterness started to bubble up in his chest. "Am I really?"

Notes for the Chapter:

Still not *totally* sure what I'm doing here, but I do have a pretty good idea where I want to go with it. If people are interested in seeing more, I'll keep working on this, but I'm not sure what the update schedule will be.

3. Chapter 3

The birthday party itself was nice, but very understated for such a momentous occasion. Which, when Mike thought about it, was so very like Will. His friends had tried to insist on a big bash, or a trip, or *something* to celebrate Will's journey into adulthood. But the young man had just smiled and refused, saying that all he wanted was for the people he loved to be there to celebrate with him. And so that's how it came to be that the Party, plus Joyce, Jessica, and Hopper were the only guests in attendance. Jonathan had wanted badly to come home from college for it, but he was right in the middle of finals during a particularly tough semester for him, so Will had told him not to worry about it and focus on his studies.

Joyce had tried her best to create a somewhat festive atmosphere, so the walls, which were once hung with Christmas lights and hand-drawn tunnel maps, were now adorned with balloons and birthday streamers. Hopper brought over copious amounts of pizza and soda, causing Joyce to question if all of that was really needed. But as the food disappeared under the onslaught of seven teenagers, the sheriff just gave her a smug look and a wink.

After dinner, a fierce game of Pictionary broke out (because leave it to the birthday boy to choose a drawing game). When it became painfully clear just how much better than everyone else he was at it, he was eventually forced to start drawing left-handed instead. Much to Mike's chagrin, Will's left-handed drawings were about on par with Mike's normal ones, but it helped to even out the game some at least.

Cake was next, and after singing Happy Birthday to Will in the dining room, the group looked on as he closed his eyes briefly before blowing out his candles.

"What'd you wish for?" Dustin asked excitedly once all the flames had been extinguished. Will looked vaguely uncomfortable, but Eleven came to his rescue.

"He can't say," she put in before Will could answer. "Otherwise it won't come true."

"Yeah, *Dustin*." Max put in smugly.

"Sorry Dustin, they're correct," Will grinned, choosing to keep it to himself.

After cake, presents were opened. Will was the happy recipient of a new sketchbook, some comics, a Rubik's cube, and a couple of t-shirts. He thanked everyone warmly after each gift, assuring them it was just what he wanted. He got to the last gift, which Jessica had wrapped prettily in bright blue paper.

"One gift from both of you guys?" Will asked, glancing at the tag as his lips curving into a playful smile. "This had better be really good then."

Mike scoffed. "Just open it and see, Byers."

And he did. And instead of the smile that Mike was expecting to see break across Will's face, a look of worry...almost panic appeared. "M-Mike....Jess....how much did you spend on -"

"Ah-ah, that's bad manners William," Jessica broke in.

"But...I've seen this set before, I can't possibly accept such an expensive-"

Mike was the one who cut in this time, fixing Will with a reassuring smile. "We got a good deal, I promise. Just enjoy it, okay? You only turn 18 once. Besides...we can't really return it, it's kinda got your name on it already."

His friend looked down and silently ran his fingertips over the engraved *Will Byers* on the little bronze plaque. He studied it carefully for several seconds before finally nodding, breaking out into the smile that Mike had been waiting to see. "Thank you both, so much. I'll treasure it always," he said getting up to plant a quick kiss on his girlfriend's lips, before crossing over to Mike.

"What, do I get one too?" Mike asked jokingly, before his brain caught up to what his mouth was saying. For a split second, Mike's heart was in his throat as he nervously surveyed the room. But there was apparently no cause for concern as everyone either broke into

laughter or shook their head playfully. Mike fought to keep a blush down as he looked at the boy in front of him, but Will only joined in the merriment, cracking right back.

"Not in front of everyone, Michael," he smirked, jokingly winking before wrapping Mike in a hug. "Seriously though...thank you." Mike's stomach was currently doing flips both from the dangerously playful banter, and the longer than normal hug from his friend. Will had always seemed to slot in perfectly for hugs, right under Mike's arm, the shorter boy's face always buried in Mike's chest. No matter the age, that never seemed to change. And even now, after all these years, they still fit perfectly together, like pieces of a puzzle.

The duo finally broke apart to see their family and friends looking on fondly. Mike's eyes landed on Jessica, and while the blonde was smiling too, there seemed to be something else there. Something unreadable that Mike couldn't quite put his finger on. But he didn't have time to linger on it as the conversation moved along.

"So, sweetheart, what do you have planned for the rest of the night?" Joyce asked.

"I think Jess and I are taking in a late movie," he replied.

"Ooooo, a late night movie, eh? Followed by a little late night drive perhaps?" Dustin cut in, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

"Dustin Henderson," Joyce said, her tone cold, her words slow and measured. "I don't know what exactly you're trying to imply, but that conversation goes no further in this house, young man. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes Mrs. Byers," the curly haired teen replied, sobering immediately. "Sorry Mrs. Byers."

The rest of the group coughed and wheezed, trying desperately to stifle their laughter as Dustin glared at them.

"Well, that's probably our cue to go," Lucas said between guffaws. Everyone quickly pitched in to help clean up before taking their leave. Final well wishes and 'happy birthdays' were said before the

group headed for the door.

"Hey, uh, Mike, can you hang back a minute?" Will asked a bit nervously. He then turned to Jessica, "Can you start the car? I'll be out in five."

Joyce noticed the change in the mood and suddenly remembered something she had to do in her room, giving the two friends some privacy. Will wordlessly moved over to sit on the couch, motioning for Mike to join him.

"What's up, Will? Mike asked worriedly.

"Well...a couple of things. First, I want to really thank you again for that gift. I know it was from both of you...but you're the only one that's seen me eying that particular set. That can't be coincidence."

Mike cleared his throat a bit, his face growing pink. "Well, I may have had some idea on what to get you..."

"And," Will cut in, "I'm also quite sure that you probably spent more than your fair share on it." His eyes narrowed as Mike was about to speak up, but the denial died on his lips. It was scary how Will saw right through him sometimes, like he had his own personal manuscript of Mike's private thoughts. The older teen just hoped that Will couldn't see all the secrets Mike was currently hiding.

"I'll have to plead the fifth on that I'm afraid," he replied, hoping to add some levity back to the situation. Will just rolled his eyes and snorted before growing serious once more. "Was...was there something else, Will?"

The boy huffed out a small laugh, completely devoid of humor as he stared straight ahead. "You know what I wished for tonight when I blew out my candles Mike? That you wouldn't hate me after I told you what I'm about to tell you."

A thousand different things ran through Mike's mind. The most prevalent being, "He knows! He found out I have a crush on him, and he doesn't feel the same." Luckily the more logical side of his mind maintained a grip on his speech control...for now.

"Will...whatever you're going to tell me, I could never hate you. Ever. You must know that." Mike was quite surprised at how calm and steady his voice sounded, everything considered.

"We'll see if you feel the same way after I tell you," Will said, unconvinced. He took a deep breath before continuing. "You see...it's about college..."

Oh. They were having *that* conversation tonight. Mike had been completely fine with shoving it to the back burner for now. He was hurting inside, but he wasn't going to bring it up until Will wanted to talk about it. And he *surely* wasn't going to broach the subject on Will's birthday of all times. Yet, here they were. Mike watched wistfully as teen in front of him stuttered.

"Um, see, the thing is, I....fuck. What I'm trying to say is....shit. Why is this so hard..."

Will looked physically ill at this point. Like he might actually throw up. He was doing his best to look in Mike's general direction, underscoring the importance of his words, but he couldn't quite bear to make direct eye contact. Mike's instinct had *always* been to protect Will, ever since they were little. To stop anything and everything that was causing him pain, physically or mentally...and tonight was no different. He couldn't bear to see his best friend struggle like this anymore. So he mercifully cut in.

"UCLA, huh?" Mike said, a sad smile on his face. Will looked up, startled and panicked. "Jessica told me," Mike confessed. "But don't be mad at her! She was just worried about you. But...I think it's awesome Will. I really do. Of course I'll miss you like crazy, but it's just college! It's not forever. You should follow your dreams, wherever they lead you, even if that is California. And no matter what, don't let *anyone* stand in your way....not even me."

For the second time in fifteen minutes, Mike found himself wrapped in the arms of Will Byers. But this hug was more fierce, almost feral, lacking all of the gentleness of the previous one. It's a hug that Mike returned with equal fervor, both parties full of desperation and raw emotion. It felt like the end of something substantial. Something that neither of the two were really quite ready to let go of yet. By the time

the two teens parted, there were tears in both of their eyes.

"Jesus Wheeler, making me cry on my birthday?" Will scolded playfully, trying to regain his composure as he dried his eyes on a sleeve of his jacket.

"My primary goal for the night is now accomplished," Mike deadpanned, wiping away his own tears as he stood up. "Now, don't you have a movie to catch and," he looked around carefully, making sure Joyce was nowhere in hearing distance, "that *late night drive* to get to?"

Will scoffed out a laugh, punching Mike softly in the shoulder as the two rose from the couch and left out the door. Will headed towards the car where Jessica was waiting for him before turning back over his shoulder. "Thank you, Mike...for everything. You're a really good friend."

"Yeah...that's what everyone keeps telling me," the dark-haired boy thought to himself, waving goodbye as he watched Will and Jessica drive off into the night.

Everything was fine at school when Monday rolled around - or at least it would've been if EVERYONE would quit asking Mike how he was 'holding up'. Will had told the rest of his family and friends about his decision to head to California for college, and while they were all ecstatic for him, suddenly they were all way too concerned with Mike's well-being.

Sure, Mike could see why they'd worry a little bit. That's why he addressed it to the group on Monday before Will and Jessica showed up at school, when Dustin carefully asked how he was doing. Mike told them the same thing he had told Will - he was a little disappointed of course, but that feeling was far outweighed by his excitement for Will. That college wasn't forever, and they'd see each other again, just like all of the Party was going to have to deal with. Mike thought that discussion would be the end of it. Mike thought wrong.

One by one throughout the day, Lucas, Max, and Dustin (again) came up privately and asked him if he was really alright. Each time Mike

answered the same - he was fine, thank you very much. It would suck, but he would adjust, he's a grown man now. He didn't need anyone holding his hand going off to college. With each encounter his answers got more and more terse, but he just managed to pass off a tight smile and stop himself from going off on his well-intentioned friends.

It was late in the afternoon when Mike thankfully found himself in the school library - alone. He had a free period this semester, right before his last class of the day. He was the only one in the Party to have the free period, though occasionally other members would skip their class to hang out with him, if nothing too important was happening in class that day. If it was anyone, it was usually Will. Even though Will loved the Art class he had that period, sometimes he was so far ahead of everyone else in it, he would take a class off - the teacher didn't even care either. But Will hadn't done that ever since Jessica joined the class. And today, that was just fine with Mike because now no one could interrupt his brooding.

Brooding was something Mike Wheeler did well, and everyone knew it. He could sit and sulk in sullen silences like no other, getting lost in his own thoughts and daring anyone to try to break into them. Right now all of his thoughts were on a certain brown-haired artist, who was about to move across the country. He and Will had always been right by each other's sides, ever since they met. Every memory, good and bad, came flooding back to Mike.

All the way back to kindergarten, mustering up all the courage in his small five-year-old body to go up and ask the equally lonely looking boy on the swing to be his friend. Spending their formative years together, playing video games at the arcade, dodging bullies, having countless sleepovers. When Will went missing....when they found Will's 'body' and Mike thought his heart was going to rip in two. Finding him alive after being told he was dead.

Telling Will they'd go crazy together. Letting him know that asking him to be his friend was the best thing Mike's ever done.

And now it was all about to come to an end. Mike wracked his brain, wondering if there was anything that he could've done differently to stop this from happening. He should've told Will about his feelings

earlier. But...would it have even made a difference? Whatever inclinations Mike might have had about Will's sexuality before, he was clearly with Jessica now. So he would've never been interested in Mike in the first place.

You could've at least tried though. Then at least you'd know for sure.

"HOW COULD I TRY!? I didn't even know I felt this way about him?" Mike shouted back internally at the voice in his head.

Didn't you? Are you sure?

"NO! I mean sure, I loved spending time with him, maybe a little more than the others," he continued his inner monologue. "And yeah, he was the first one I looked for everyday when I arrived at school. And perhaps every time he smiled at me, it made me feel warm and fuzzy inside, and if he was out sick it usually ruined my whole day and....oh....fuck."

"How did I not see it before?" he muttered aloud, before allowing his forehead to slam down into the table in front of him. "I'm such an idiot..."

"Yeah, you kind of are," a familiar voice agreed, causing Mike to shoot his head up.

Now, while Dustin, Lucas, or Max had also been known to take a class off every once in awhile, and roll with Mike to go get some ice cream or something, the one person who never skipped class was Eleven. After missing out on the normalcy of school for much of her childhood, the girl actually treasured every class now, relishing the opportunity to learn. And that's why Mike was so surprised to see her walking up to his table.

"El!? What are you doing here? You never skip class."

"This is more important," she said concisely as she sat down across from him.

"El," he groaned, "please don't ask me if I'm okay, I don't think I can handle it anymore."

"Why would I ask you that, Mike?" she replied. "It's clear that you're not okay. You're not okay at all."

Mike eyed his ex-girlfriend warily. Their breakup in the summer after freshman year had been pretty rough for Mike, but he had eventually gotten over it. The Party was awkward for a couple of months, but when all was said and done, Mike and Eleven were even better friends after than they had been before.

"That's bullshit El, I'm fine."

"You're hurting, Mike. Inside. I can sense it."

"OH MY GOD!!" Mike finally exploded. A quick scowl from the librarian only served to temper his volume somewhat. "Nothing is changing. I'm still going to the same college, it'll just be on my own! Which is probably good for me, right? Really put me outside my comfort zone, force me to adapt. But I can make it! I can! Why does everyone think I'm going to fall apart or break without Will?!"

"Because you love him," Eleven replied matter-of-factly, looking wholly unimpressed with Mike's outburst.

Mike finds himself spluttering a bit before replying. "Well yeah, of course I do, he's my best friend. And it's gonna suck not having him there, but -"

"No, you love him...like you used to love me."

Time seemed to stand still as Mike locked eyes with the girl in front of him, trying to read her expression. But she had always been good at hiding what she was feeling, something that she had learned out of necessity with her childhood being how it was.

"You don't know what you're talking about," is what Mike finally decided to go with. The reply sounded weak even to his own ears, and he could see it wasn't fooling Eleven either. His face fell as all of the anger and defiance left his body.

"Mike....it's okay you know. It's not that strange. You guys have been a part of each other's lives for forever. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Right," he scoffed, "I'm crushing on my straight best friend who has a girlfriend, and there's nothing to be ashamed of."

Eleven's poker face finally broke into a small smile, evidently pleased with herself at being right. That might annoy Mike normally, but his whole body actually felt a little lighter now that he had said the truth out loud. Now that he had admitted it to *someone*.

"Absolutely nothing," she repeated firmly. "Watch, when you tell Will, he will agree with me, I'm sure of it."

Mike's face scrunched up in horror before he quickly responded. "Well, I guess that's something we'll never know, because I'm definitely not telling Will."

"Mike, you have to tell him...friends don't lie."

"We're not kids anymore El," Mike replied, his annoyance with the conversation beginning to grow again. "Besides, I'm not lying, I'm just not telling him anything at all. I can't. I mean, did you miss the part where he's in a relationship *with a girl*."

"So were you....once."

Mike's mouth snapped shut at that response. His stunned silence seemed to urge El to continue.

"Look, I just think that he deserves to know. You deserve to tell him. You can't just leave this unsaid while he moves 3,000 miles away. I'm not going to say anything. I would never betray your confidence like that...but just promise me that you'll at least think about it, okay?" She reached across the table and brushed the single tear that was rolling down Mike's cheek away. The tear that he wasn't even aware had fallen. He reached up and gently grabbed her hand, giving it a thankful squeeze.

"Okay, El," he said softly. "I'll think about it. I promise."

Notes for the Chapter:

The further I get into this fic, the more it seems like not a great idea. But oh well! It's out there, so I'm

gonna finish dammit. Thoughts/Feedback
appreciated.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

So I just wanna thank everyone for the nice comments last chapter. I don't wanna make it seem like I don't have faith in this story, because I do. Just still kinda new to this and got a little self-conscious. So the reviews were very welcome. That being said, this chapter took me longer than I wanted to get where I like it, but I think we're there now. So here you go, this one's a doozy.

It had been two days since the conversation with Eleven, and Mike had definitely kept his promise - he had been thinking of little else in fact. He'd been careful to put on a chipper demeanor around his friends though, especially Jess and Will, lest they suspect something was wrong. But here alone in the confines of his room, Mike was in a state of indecision. It was Wednesday night, and while he should be in bed getting some much needed sleep, he was instead pacing the floor of his bedroom.

Normally in these situations, he would lean on Will for advice. Will was a great listener, and always steered Mike in the right direction. But this time, for obvious reasons, that wasn't an option. So Mike was going to have to figure this out on his own.

"Okay, simplify," he said to himself rationally. "You have two options. Either tell him. Or, you know, don't."

Yeah...no fucking shit, Wheeler. He flopped down dramatically on his bed, his face starting to contort into a frown before he caught it. He couldn't afford to turn into emo Mike. Not right now. Will wouldn't be there to pull him out of it this time.

Yet another thing Will was good at. He was the only one that could get through to Mike when he was brooding. And sometimes it wasn't even what he said...it was just the fact that he was there. Mike let his eyes roam to the framed picture sitting on his dresser, and despite the inner turmoil he was currently going through, he felt his lips curl up

in a smile as he let himself remember...

He had fallen into a dark place when Eleven broke up with him, saying she needed to focus on herself instead of a relationship. Mike had been devastated and curled into himself, trying to shut the rest of the world out. He had refused to cry though - he decided that's the one thing he wasn't going to do.

When word of the breakup got out a few days later, Dustin, Lucas, and Will came over to try to cheer Mike up. The boy wasn't really in the mood to be cheered though. So there they all sat in awkward silence in the basement, the TV playing in the background and Mike with a permanent scowl on his face.

"Hey, you wanna get out of here? Maybe hit the arcade or something?" Dustin asked suddenly.

Mike said nothing, but the glowering look on his face spoke volumes as quiet permeated the room once more.

"What about a movie?" Lucas asked after a time. "We could go catch the matinee."

"Yeah," Dustin agreed enthusiastically, "and then maybe the comic store after -"

"Take a fucking hint guys!!" Mike finally exploded. "I don't wanna 'hit the arcade' or 'catch a matinee'. And I'm not in the mood to shop for comics. I just want to sit here and think in silence, is that too much to ask for!?"

He could see the shock on their faces at the outburst, and he almost wanted to take it back. But he didn't. Lucas' jaw hardened as he got up. "Fine, Mike. I think you've made yourself clear. When you feel like rejoining us and maybe doing something fun with your summer, *you* can call *us*. Let's go guys."

A knot of guilt began to form in Mike's stomach as he watched the three of them leave. But his stubbornness won out in the end, and he said nothing as they walked out the door. It wasn't until later that

night as he was laying in bed, with thoughts of passing the long, endless summer days in solitude dancing in his head, that he *really* began to regret his outburst. He didn't really want to be alone after all. He was hurting inside. He needed his friends....but he couldn't exactly call them up after *that* display. So instead he fell into a fitful slumber, resigned to suffering alone.

When the doorbell rang just after breakfast the next day, Mike just sat there. He was sure it wasn't for him anyways.

"Mike, Will is here," his mom called. Mike shot up from the table and stumbled out to the front door in shock.

"Will...I didn't think you'd come back..."

"Hey Mike," he said nervously, "look, I can leave if you want me to. I know yesterday you said that you wanted some quiet to think. But, um, I like quiet too, it helps me draw. But, uh, I don't really like being alone all the time. So I thought that maybe we could just sit and be quiet together. You'd actually be doing me a big favor."

It was bullshit. Mike knew it. Will didn't mind being alone, and even if he did, he wasn't the one in a giant fight with the other Party members. He could just as easily go hang out with them. No, he was doing this all for Mike's benefit, somehow knowing that Mike didn't want to be left by himself. In that moment, there was nothing Mike wanted to do more than surge forward and wrap his friend in a hug.

But he didn't - they were teenage boys after all. Besides, he didn't wanna ruin Will's carefully crafted story, nor disrupt his own sullen facade, so all he said aloud was, "Yeah sure, I guess that'd be okay," before leading them down into the basement.

Will was good to his word and spent most of the day in silence sketching, while Mike hung out in the blanket fort absent-mindedly playing with the SuperComm like El used to do. The idle static was the only sound that filled the room, as the friends only spoke when necessary. It was a comfortable silence though, nothing awkward or tense about it, and Mike grew more and more relaxed with each passing hour. On a few occasions when going to the bathroom or getting a drink, Mike tried to sneak a glance at what Will was

drawing, but each time he came near the smaller boy flipped it over to hide it. A part of Mike started to get annoyed, but when he fixed Will with a glare, the boy just gave a small grin.

"It's a secret," he said simply. But the smile on his face made it nearly impossible to be upset with him, so Mike just grunted and moved on. When Will finally left later that evening, Mike walked him to the door.

"Um, thanks for letting me hang out today Mike, it was fun. Maybe I could come back tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure. You know, if you want to," Mike replied nonchalantly.

"Great. I'll see you then," Will said with smile. He gave Mike a quick little half hug before turning and scooting off into the dusk. It only lasted a second or two, but the fleeting contact seemed to melt some of the tension out of Mike's body, and he couldn't help it if a fond smile for the departing boy crossed his face, if only for a second.

The pattern went on like this for the better part of a week - Will would come over and silently draw, while Mike would brood. But as each day passed, Mike would come out of his shell just a little bit more. On the second day his answers became just a bit less clipped and surly. On the third day, he came out from the blanket fort for a couple of hours to watch some TV with Will, the two sitting side by side on the couch together.

By the time day four rolled around, Mike was feeling a lot more like his old self. Not totally...there was still something festering deep inside. But he had progressed into speaking full sentences now, and he surprised both himself and Will when he inadvertently laughed at a joke the smaller boy told. He had immediately schooled his face back into something more neutral to try to hide it. Will didn't comment on it, but a tiny smirk of satisfaction playing on his face didn't go unnoticed by Mike.

As Will left that evening, Mike was thinking that this might be fine after all. He didn't have to talk about his feelings and get them out in the open. He'd just bury it and move on. That would probably be better for everyone anyways. He retreated back down to the

basement and sat down on the couch, only to notice that a piece of paper with writing on the back of it had been left on the coffee table where Will had been working all week.

To Mike: I know it may seem like you're all alone right now, but just know that you're not.

When Mike grabbed the piece of paper and flipped it over, his breath caught in his chest. It was a beautifully detailed work of Mike and Will's D&D characters climbing a rather steep mountain. Will's cleric character had made it to a level stretch of ground and was reaching back to lend a hand to Mike's struggling paladin. The words *No Party Member Left Behind* were emblazoned along the top of the page in nice calligraphy style lettering.

A few drops of wetness landed on the paper before Mike even realized that he was crying. He scrambled to put the drawing down before he could do any real damage to it and tried to get a grip on himself. But it seemed that the floodgates were opened now and all the tears he had been holding back since the breakup happened all tried to flow out at once. He must've spent the better part of an hour curled up sobbing on that musty basement couch. But when it was finally over and he managed to compose himself, he realized he actually felt much better. Much lighter. Exhausted, mind you, but lighter, as if a huge weight had been freed from his chest. The boy fell asleep right there in the basement, too tired to make it back up to his room.

When he awoke the next morning the first thing he did was taking the drawing up to his room and found a special place to hang it on his wall. After that he took a shower, put on some fresh clothes, and was practically waiting by the door for Will to arrive.

"Hey, Mike, you look...better today," Will said as he entered.

"Feel better," Mike admitted as he led the way down to the basement. Of course he didn't tell him that he was crying all night because Will didn't need to know *everything*.

The day felt a lot more like a normal hangout session than the previous ones. Mike didn't go into the blanket fort once, and Will

wasn't trying to hide what he was drawing from Mike this time. It was a bit of an odd scene, a snow-covered plain with scores of tropical trees and plants growing up from the ground.

"What you got going on there?" Mike asked, interested.

"Eh. A poor attempt at world building I guess," Will answered, crinkling up his nose. "I kind of wanted a radical juxtaposition, but I can't think of how it might realistically come to be, so I might scrap it."

Mike nodded and fell silent. Will liked world building, but usually he was just in charge of the more artistic parts. Mike usually came up with the stories and rules behind them. But Mike had something more important on his mind that he needed to get out first.

"Um...thanks Will. For that picture yesterday. It was really, really awesome and, well...it actually helped a lot. This whole week has really sucked, but...without you it would've been a lot worse."

Will looked up in surprise, as if he was a little shocked at Mike finally opening up. But his trademark Byers smile soon spread across his face. "Hey no problem. Rule of the Party. No member left behind, right?"

"Right," Mike agreed, offering a smile in response. But it quickly fell from his face. "I just hope the Party will still be the same after all this."

"What do you mean!? Of course it will," Will said incredulously.

"Maybe," Mike replied doubtfully. "I guess Dustin and Lucas will forgive me for being such a douche. But I don't know how things with El are ever going to be...not weird. Maybe it would've been better if we never dated. If I never told her I had a crush on her. Then at least we'd still be friends."

Will was quiet for a second before putting down his pencil and answering. "I think you did the right thing Mike."

"How?"

"I mean, just imagine living these past three years having never told her, but always thinking about it. Being around her every day, but not acting on it. You can't just keep secrets that big locked up inside like that Mike. They'll eat away at your soul. So really, even though it didn't work out in the long run, I think you made the right decision."

"...you really think so?"

"I know so. You know how? Because in the end Mike Wheeler, when all is said and done, you always seem to make the right decision. It's one of your best qualities."

Will went back to his drawing and Mike just sat there for a moment, a blush rising to his cheeks. It wasn't often he was left speechless, after all. By the time he was done being tongue tied, too much time had passed for him to simply say 'thank you'. It would've been awkward. So instead he chose to go with...

"Hot springs."

"Uh...I'm sorry?" Will asked, glancing up in confusion.

"If there were underground hot springs, it might make the ground soft enough for your plants to grow out of it," Mike explained sheepishly. "It, uh, it might not solve all the problems. But it's a start at least."

"Yeah," Will agreed, breaking into a grin. "It's a start."

Mike stood up, a smile appearing on his face as he strode over and picked up the picture that Will had drawn him. It had meant so much to him, that in the years since he had even went out and bought a frame especially for it.

"You can't just keep secrets that big locked up inside like that Mike. They'll eat away at your soul."

Mike let out a nervous chuckle. It seemed that even though he couldn't actually talk to Will about this situation, the boy still managed to come through with advice for him. He now knew he would regret it if he didn't at least tell Will how he felt. He had to

give it a chance. Mike took a shaky deep breath and fumbled under his bed until he found what he was looking for.

Sweaty hands nervously gripped the SuperComm as he found the correct channel and held down the button. "Will, do you read? This is a Code Red. I repeat, this is a Code Red."

Mike walked through the woods, his jacket bundled around him tightly. He had taken this path a thousand times before, though mostly in daylight. In the dark, everything seemed a little less friendly, a little less familiar. He was surprised Will had chosen Castle Byers to meet at this time of night. Hell, he was surprised Will had even answered his Code Red, they hadn't really used the walkies in years. But he had answered, and once he learned Mike needed to talk, privately, he had not hesitated to set up a meeting.

Mike had thought about driving to Will's to make his walk shorter, but he knew his damn station wagon would wake up everyone within a mile radius. So instead he decided to park it at the other end of Mirkwood, and walk the short remaining distance to Castle Byers. He saw Will standing in front of the rundown structure as he approached the familiar clearing.

"Mike," he said, worry etched all over his face. "Are you okay?"

A pang of guilt shot through Mike as he came to a halt a few feet away from his friend. "Shit, I didn't mean to worry you. I mean...I'm okay, physically, yes."

Will's face relaxed just a bit as he let out a long breath. "But..."

"But...well..."

Mike had been practicing this conversation all the way over here, but suddenly his brain decided not to function correctly, so instead of his carefully structured speech, all that came out was, "I don't want you to go to UCLA! I want you to come to NYU....with me."

The look on Will's face shifted to confusion. "What? Mike, you can't.....you can't just say that! We've been through this. You're the

one told me to follow my dreams!"

"I know! I know I did, but then I did some thinking and...I don't wanna spend four years away from you man. I don't know if I could take it."

Mike knew he was still dancing around the main point. He just couldn't bring himself to say it for some reason. And he was beginning to hate himself for it, because the teen in front of him was now wearing a face as if he were being torn in half.

"This is really unfair Mike," he said, almost in a whisper. "Do you even *know* the pain I went through to come to this decision in the first place? Getting your blessing on it meant so much to me, and now you're taking it back? And why exactly?"

"Why? Y-you're my best friend, Will, I -"

"No! No Mike, that's not a reason, okay? Not enough for me to give up going to my dream school. And what about Jessica? You want me to walk out on my girlfriend that loves me -"

"I love you," Mike blurted out, causing Will to come to a screeching halt.

Well shit...it was out there now.

"Mike....what..." Will asked, clearly giving him a chance to take it back. But Mike was through running - he wasn't backing down.

"I said, I love you, okay? I don't want you to go because...because I've fallen for you Will." Mike closed the remaining distance between the two and took Will's hands into his own. "I've tried to imagine being away from you for four years, only seeing each other during holidays, and I just can't deal with how that feels! And...I know this is weird for you, and I'm sorry, and I don't know if you could...if you could even like me back like that. *And* I know this is shitty timing for a number of reasons. I mean, you're leaving for college, with your perfect, smoking hot girlfriend, and I could've made this confession at literally any point before now. But being the oblivious idiot I am, I just had to wait until you got into a relationship before I realized it,

and...and I just...."

Mike ran out of steam as his desperation filled confession finally died off. Honestly, he didn't know what else to say. He was kind of hoping Will would've jumped in here before now to tell Mike to shut up, and that he had always felt the same way, and they'd fall into each other's arms. That's how it always happened in the movies.

But this wasn't fiction, this was reality. Will didn't cut him off mid-rant with a kiss. There were no credits rolling, no happily ever after. No instead Will was just standing there, absolutely frozen in shock. It's probably the worst reaction that could've happened. Even Will yelling and getting angry or disgusted would've been better - because at least then Mike would know where he stood. This though...this was a different form of torture.

"Will..." Mike tried softly, hoping to elicit some sort of response. He gently squeezed the other's hands that he still held in his own. But there was nothing. No response. Will was just staring blankly ahead at him - almost through him.

Shit, shit, shit. This was bad. This was really bad. Mike hadn't planned for this. Of all the scenarios he had dreamed up, an unresponsive, frozen Will wasn't one of them. There *was* no contingency plan. So at that very moment his brain just decided to turn off completely with a *'hey, good luck out there man'*. That must have been what happened, because under no rational circumstances would Mike think that *this* was the time to lean in to try to kiss Will Byers. And yet there he found himself, bending down, inches away from connecting their lips when Will finally spoke.

"Oh my god."

Mike froze on the spot, just before he had reached the other boy's mouth. 'Oh my god' wasn't an inherently negative phrase in itself but...

"Oh. My. GOD."

Yeah, okay, that time definitely wasn't positive, and made Mike retreat back a few inches as Will gradually became unfrozen.

"I...I can't believe this. I really can't believe this."

There was still a level of ambiguity to those words, and, well Mike needed to know for sure. But before he could ask for any sort of clarification, a rustling noise from behind Will grabbed his attention. "Well, believe it babe," a familiar female voice piped up as Jessica crawled her way out of Castle Byers.

Mike immediately dropped Will's hands and jumped back a good four to six feet, as if scalded.

What....

What is this?

Mike watched in horror as Jessica sidled up to Will, a smug expression on her face as she looped an arm around him. Did they...did they set him up? Oh my god, they set him up!?

"This...is..." Will's expression is unreadable as he trails off.

"I told you, babe," Jessica said, leaning her head over onto Will's shoulder. "I fucking told you."

"Well, you were right Jess," Will replied, still seemingly in shock. "The whole fucking time, you were right."

Notes for the Chapter:

Me as a reader: "Ugh, Cliffhangers are so cliché and tired. If your story is good enough, people will come back without you resorting to cheap tricks, smh."

Me as an author: "Hah! This one will really stick it to 'em! What a great way to end the chapter."

...I'm both sorry and not sorry. Feel free to yell at me in the comments or just stop by with your thoughts on the chapter. As always, thanks for reading!

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

Heyo, it's ya boi, I'm bac-

ducks rotten tomato

Hey! I'm sorry okay, it took longer than I wanted -

ducks dozens of rotten tomatoes

I said I'm sorry! haha. For real though, even though the extreme cliffhanger is not a tactic I plan to employ a lot in the future, it did generate the most comments I've ever gotten for a chapter. On the downside it put a tremendous amount of pressure on me, because while I had this last chapter outlined, I hadn't started to actually write it at all. So, yeah. Both fun and not fun. Anyways, enough babbling now (I'll babble more at the end), here you go, enjoy all the melodrama!

Mike was no stranger to being slugged in the gut. After all, the Party had been the targets of bullies all throughout middle school. But usually after getting punched in the gut, you'd fall to the ground and curl in on yourself, having at least a little time to recover before the next blow fell. It sucked, of course, but it was manageable. This feeling that Mike was feeling right now though? This was a whole different level of pain. This is what he imagined getting punched in the stomach over and over would feel like, with no time to recover in between blows.

Mike's eyes darted between the faces of two of his closest friends standing in front of him. Jessica's was easy to read. It said 'we caught you red-handed, and there's nothing you can do to explain your way out of this one'. And as much fear and anger as Mike was feeling right now, he had to admit, she was right. They had caught him. The only question in his mind was when. The stargazing night? The birthday gift? The hug at the party? He guessed it didn't really matter though,

did it. Bottom line was he had been exposed, and Jessica was loving every second of it.

He wished Will was as easy to read, but he wasn't. Will had always been good at hiding his emotions, ever since they were little. Even before the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer. Mike had always thought it was Lonnie's psychological and emotional abuse that had forced Will to learn how to put on the emotionless mask he wore, purely as a means of survival. Of course all the trauma of '83 and '84 had only deepened those tendencies within his best friend. It got to be so that one could only tell what Will Byers was thinking if Will Byers wanted it to be known. That is, with one exception - Mike.

Mike could read Will better than anyone else. The ever so slight quirk of the left corner of his mouth when he was happy. The nearly unnoticeable pulse point right between his eyebrows that picked up whenever he was scared. The tiny crinkle of his nose that just so happened to occur when he didn't quite understand something in class . Mike could pick them all out without hesitation...*most* of the time. But now, as he searched Will's face for some hint, some tiny inclination of what was going through the other boy's head, he was coming up absolutely empty.

Still, someone had to say *something*. Will still looked too shocked to respond, and Jessica seemed content to just stand there and watch Mike twist in the wind. So, Mike decided to go ahead and bite the bullet.

"Will.....Jess...I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean -"

"Sorry for what, Mike?" Jess cut in. "Sorry for trying to kiss my boyfriend? Or sorry for putting Will through the anguish of the college decision again? Or..."

Mike wants to snap back at her. Tell her that this is between he and Will, so she can just shut the fuck up. But he can't - because she's right. He's fucked up. He's fucked up on so many levels. Betrayed Jessica's friendship, betrayed Will's friendship, and maybe lost them both.

"You're right," he said through gritted teeth.

"What was that, Wheelie Boy? Speak up."

"I said you're right," Mike said louder. "I...I have no excuse for my actions. I have no explanation. All I can say is I'm sorry...and I'm ready for the consequences, whatever they may be."

"Well that's good to hear, 'cause consequences are indeed coming," she replied, her face getting impossibly smugger. That threat seemed to be the key to *finally* unfreezing Will.

"Jess, I dunno," he said, looking at Mike with what might be a fragment of pity. "I'm not sure *that's* necessary..."

Shit. This was bad right? That sounded bad.

"What? You know what the deal was Will, you owe me. Now do it! Do what you said you would do if I was right," she demanded.

Yep, definitely bad.

Will just looked at her unsure for about ten seconds before he set his jaw and began a slow yet determined walk towards Mike. The older boy briefly considered running; Russia? Japan? Maybe Antarctica was nice this time of year. But no. He said he was willing to face the consequences, so that's what he was going to do. And if he got punched right in the face, Mike would just pick himself back up, beg for forgiveness, and try to salvage whatever remained of their friendship.

The moment was here, Will was now standing right in front of him, his unwavering gaze pinning Mike down to the spot. The older boy closed his eyes and steeled himself, determined to take whatever Will dished out. He was bracing for a punch, a slap, a kick, a blow of *some kind*. What he wasn't bracing for - what he *never* expected - was to feel gentle hands on his face and a pair of warm lips connecting to his own.

Now, one would think that in this situation, the first thing that would go through Mike's mind is "Oh my god, Will Byers is kissing me," because, you know, WILL BYERS IS FUCKING KISSING HIM. But that's not his first thought. No, instead the first thing Mike thinks is,

"Oh thank god, my best friend doesn't hate me. I haven't ruined everything after all. I haven't lost the most important person in the world to me."

However that thought only lasts about three seconds, because the second thing that goes through his mind is *definitely*, "OH MY GOD, WILL BYERS IS KISSING ME." He's not sure how he arrived here, and frankly he doesn't really care, because Will seems intent on deepening the kiss, and Mike isn't going to argue with him. He lowers his head and parts his lips, giving the shorter boy the access that his tongue has been somewhat impatiently asking for.

He swears there's a spark of electricity as their tongues touch for the first time. Will tasted strongly of mint, cherry chapstick, and an underlying note of something that was just uniquely Will. Mike's hands came up to tightly grasp at the smaller boy's shoulders, desperately seeking something to hold onto as his legs were turning to jello beneath him. The raven-haired teen made a small noise in the back of his throat, almost akin to a whimper. If asked about it later, he would definitely deny it though. After all, there's no witnesses around and -

The third thought that that crossed Mike's mind is anything but pleasant, as he *finally* remembered that Jessica is there watching. He broke away from the kiss with a gasp, his eyes flying open. Directly in front of him he sees Will, his eyes still closed, kissing at the air, desperately chasing after Mike's lips with his own. At any other moment, that would've been freaking adorable, but right now Mike is focused on one thing. His eyes swing over to Jessica, but instead of finding her crying or red-faced with rage as he expected, she is positively *brimming* with joy, a huge smile on her face. Will, for his part, has managed to recompose himself, and is now just standing there blushing. And, well, Mike's brain has just about had it with being confused tonight.

"Can somebody tell me exactly what the *fuck* is going on here?" he said, his voice a little sharper than he intended.

All that bravery and gusto that Will had shown during the kiss was now gone, and the look on his face quickly turned anxious. "Mike...um...promise you won't be mad?"

"No...actually I don't promise that," Mike's eyes narrowed in response. "I repeat. What. Is. Going. ON?"

"Now Michael," Jess cut in, "if you insist on being mad, then be mad at me. It was my idea after all." The blonde was trying her best to keep her tone light and playful, but this was the most unnerved Mike had ever seen the confident girl.

"*WHAT* was your idea?" he yelled, exasperated.

The two in front of him exchanged a hurried glance and then both started babbling at the same time, making it nearly impossible to distinguish anything.

"Not *you*," Mike said, silencing Jessica with a glance. "You, Will. I want to hear from you what is going on."

Now it was Will who looked like he wanted to run. But instead he drew two shaky breaths and nodded. "Well, I guess I'll start from the beginning then," he said slowly. "I...I like you Mike. Really, really like you. I always have, ever since we were like 11. Or maybe before, who knows."

Mike's heart is soaring now, not believing the words that are coming out of Will's mouth. But that doesn't explain everything - not by a long shot. So he wills his face to remain neutral as Will continues.

"Jess, um, she found out that I was...that I didn't like girls. And then, through a series of circumstances, she found about my crush on you. And she was *sure* you liked me back and you were either hiding it like I was, or you didn't even know it yourself yet."

Clever girl.

"I told her she was wrong, that there was no way you could ever like me like that. So, she...um...kinda proposed that we pretend to date. To see if you would admit your feelings, either to me or to yourself..or both."

And....AND?!! Mike keeps waiting for more explanation to follow, but Will has stopped talking, as if that had covered everything. Jessica, in the meantime, had crept back to Will's side and gave his hand an

encouraging squeeze.

"So, you mean to tell me," Mike started, slow and measured, "that this whole time...this whole thing...was a FAKE RELATIONSHIP!?"

"Um...yes?" Will answered, obviously a little frightened at Mike's impending reaction.

But the older boy simply shook his head. "Bullshit. All those dates? All that alone time you spent together? It was all for show?"

"I mean...we liked spending time together, sure. But only as friends. But the rest of it...yeah, Jess said we had to sell it or else no one would believe us."

Mike's mind was whirring, desperately looking for holes in Will's explanation. Why? He didn't know. This was the outcome he wanted after all. But something about this just didn't seem right. Something was still off....

"I literally caught you guys making out though!" Mike exclaimed, suddenly remembering. "Surely you're not going to tell me you always made out on the random chance someone popped in! I showed up early that day and surprised you guys!"

Jessica finally broke her silence with a snort and a laugh. "First of all Mike, you're always early, so that was always at least a little expected. Secondly, even if it wasn't, when is the last time you have been able to *drive* anywhere and approach undetected?"

The older boy is confused for a second before the answer hits home. "The station wagon. That fucking station wagon." He winced as he realized his mistake. That stupid thing made such a racket, there was no way the two inside hadn't heard him pull up that day, which meant only one thing - they wanted him to see. All of the pieces were falling into place. They were telling the truth...which meant...

Will *liked* him. Like *actually* liked him. Mike knew he should be happy, ecstatic even, so he's not sure why anger is currently building in his chest. Guess no one likes being made a fool of.

"So this was just all a giant fucking experiment, huh?" he asked

bitterly, glaring at the two in front of him. "Did you guys have fun? Laughing at me behind my back as you played with my emotions?"

"Mike, no, that's not what -" Will cut in desperately, reaching out a hand to place on his friend's shoulder. But Mike angrily slapped it away before it could get there.

"How am I supposed to believe anything you say now Will!? You've been lying to me for months! About Jessica, about going to UCLA, about -"

"UCLA wasn't a lie, Mike," Will broke in. His voice was quiet, but his words somehow cut through the brisk night air, taking all of the wind out of Mike's sails.

"...what?"

"UCLA is real Mike. I really applied there, and got accepted. I just....couldn't do it anymore."

Mike was sure his mouth was hanging open in shock. Every time he thought the surprises were over, another one came. "Couldn't do what anymore, Will?"

"I couldn't keep being around you, but not being *with* you. It's been hard enough for all these years, but going off to college together? Actually *living* with you, having you around all the time so close but yet out of reach...it would've destroyed me."

You can't just keep secrets that big locked up inside like that Mike. They'll eat away at your soul.

"Then WHY didn't you tell me, Will? All these years...all this time. I mean, I get it when I was dating El, sure, you couldn't really do it then. But after that? Christ Will, this whole time -"

"I tried, okay!" Will exclaimed, his voice louder than it had been all night. "I mean I hinted so much...as much as I dared without actually coming out and saying it."

A lot of Mike's anger had faded, seeing the wistful expression on Will's face. There it was again, that damn inclination to stop Will

Byers from feeling any pain. "You could've, you know," Mike said softly. "Come out and said it."

"I couldn't risk it," Will replied, shaking his head. "You...you never showed any signs at all that you might be...interested in me. Or guys in general. And....outside of my family, you're the most important person on the planet to me Mike. I didn't think you would probably abandon me if I told you how I felt. But I wasn't sure. Not completely. And I couldn't risk losing you as a friend. That's one chance I could never take."

"But you could go to college 3,000 miles away without me?" Mike asked. He wasn't upset anymore, he was just genuinely confused.

A rueful smile crossed Will's face. "Yeah, I thought I could use that time to kind of...get past my crush on you. Maybe even find someone who would like me back. Truly like me for me. And then, once college was over, I was going to do whatever I could to reconnect with you, follow you wherever you wanted to go, and recapture what was most important to me - our friendship. You know, just Mike and Will...without any of the anxiety that comes with having a secret crush. But then Jess found out what I was planning, and convinced me to give her idea a shot first. And...well, you know the rest."

Explanation finished, Will and Jess both stood there nervously awaiting Mike's verdict. The older boy closed his eyes for a moment in contemplation, letting his mind fully digest the enormous amount of information that had just been thrown at him.

"Mike, I understand if you're mad," Will started again. "And I really am sorry, and -"

The rest of his sentence was lost as Mike strode forward and gathered his friend into a huge hug. The sigh of relief from Will was audible as he practically melded himself into the embrace, holding on tightly as if Mike might suddenly change his mind.

"No Will...I'm sorry."

A muffled '*what for*' comes from somewhere buried in Mike's jacket, as Will still hasn't been willing to detach himself quite yet.

"I should've noticed your feelings for me. *Especially* if you were dropping hints. I call myself your best friend and I didn't know about something that was that important you. That's a huge failure on my part, and I'm sorry. And no arguments," he finished as he started to hear sounds of protest from Will. "Just promise me...no more secrets, okay? From either of us."

"Definitely," Will replied, finally pulling back enough to look up into Mike's face, the smile that Mike loved so much appearing for the first time all night. "No more secrets."

Mike began to redden a bit as he noticed how close their faces were to each other. All he had to do was lower his head a little and -

"OH THANK GOD!" Jessica exclaimed, causing the two of them to jump apart a bit. "I really thought things were heading south for a minute there boys."

Mike just grinned wryly at her, noting that was the second time in ten minutes he had completely forgotten she was even there.

"Seriously, my hands are shaking still," she said, holding them out in front of her for evidence.

Mike though refused to feel sorry for her. "Well good! *You guys* are the ones that set up this extra dramatic scene! You think you have it bad with your shaky hands? I might not be able to eat for a week with all the flips my stomach is still doing. Honestly, a midnight showdown turned ambush in front of Castle Byers? That's some twisted stuff, Jess."

"Well, maybe I secretly like the drama," she replied, an easy grin returning to her lips.

"Holy shit, is it really almost midnight?" Will broke in checking his watch. "We're all gonna be zombies at school tomorrow."

"Yeah, and my dad is gonna flip. I was supposed to be home by now," the blonde admitted.

The three of them started the short walk back towards the Byers house where Jessica's car was. Even though everything was 'okay'

now, something was still sticking in the back of Mike's mind.

"Are...um...are you okay, Jess?" he asked as they walked.

Jess crinkled her nose in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, I know this was all fake for Will, and he couldn't develop real feelings for a girl, but..well, even if *you* thought this was fake, you were still dating him for months, and -"

Jessica's ringing laughter cut him off midstream. "I'm sorry, are you asking if I fell for Will while we were fake dating? And am now going to be hurt that we aren't anymore? I'm sorry Mike, but that just isn't possible."

Mike's face went from worried to annoyed in a matter of seconds. What the fuck was she saying? Was she insulting Will? Scoffing at the idea that he was someone that was worth falling in love with? Mike was just about to angrily retort something, but Will must have sensed his anger building and jumped in.

"What she means is, she already has a special someone waiting for her back home in California," he said quickly. "They're going to room together at UCLA."

"Oh," Mike said, his anger dissipating quickly. "I see. And he was, um, fine with this arrangement?"

"I swear, you two really are made for each other," Jess laughed as they arrived in Will's driveway. "Will asked the same thing before agreeing to do this. But yes, I called and explained, and she was more than okay with it. Said 'our kind' had to help each other out as much as possible."

She? Our kind? Oh. OH!

"Yeah," she chuckled at the look of realization on Mike's face. "So yes, I'm okay. Thank you though. Do you want a ride back to your car?"

"Huh? Oh, no, that's okay. I'll walk. I need to, uh, clear my head after all this anyways."

"Sure, that's the reason," she replied, giving a knowing smirk at Mike's growing blush. "Alright, well I'm outta here then, I'll give you boys some space. Good night Will," she said, walking over and giving the boy a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Good night, Jess. See you at school," Will replied fondly.

The blonde approached Mike next, reaching up to wrap her arms around his neck.

"Thank you Jess...for everything," he said as he embraced her.

"Don't you dare hurt him, Michael Wheeler," she whispered in his ear. "Don't you dare."

Mike and Will watched her from the porch as she drove off into the night. As her tail lights faded away, they turned to look at each other. "Man...hell of a night, huh?" Mike said awkwardly. Will just looked at him incredulously before busting up in muffled laughter. It was contagious, as Will's laughter always was, and Mike was soon chuckling along with him.

"Yeah, that's like the understatement of the century Mike," he replied. Mike grinned in reply before reaching down to take Will's hand in his own, loving the way Will flushed at the gesture.

"There is one thing I just want to make sure of," he began. Will just quirked an eyebrow, urging him on. "Um, about college, uh...I want you to know that I'm sorry I tried to make you change your mind, and I support whatever your decision is, and -"

"Mike...there is no decision. Knowing you feel the same way about me that I do about you is more than I ever believed possible. Of course I'm coming to New York with you...if you still want me to."

The taller boy put on a brief show of contemplation before grinning down at the other. "Of course I do, dummy."

Will crashed into him with another hug, burying his face in the crook of Mike's neck with a sigh of contentment.

"Hey," Mike said, rubbing small circles in his back to get his

attention. Will looked up at him, their faces, so, so close for the second time that night. Only this time there was no one to interrupt them. "Can I kiss you?" Mike asked softly.

Will nodded as a delightful tinge colored his cheeks. "You don't have to ask, doofus," he replied as Mike swooped down and connected their mouths. They parted briefly foreheads still touching as Will whispered against his lips, "You never have to ask."

Notes for the Chapter:

Fun note - when I first had the idea to write this fic, the ambush at Castle Byers was the first scene that popped in my head, and I kind of expanded the rest of the fic from that. But when I outlined it, I never envisioned Mike getting mad. Just him being grateful things had worked out, and happily ever after etc.

But when I was actually writing it, trying to feel what emotions Mike would be feeling, even though there would've been mostly relief, a substantial amount of anger kept coming through, so I felt the need to throw that in there.

Also, I hope the explanation for Will/Jessica's makeout scene didn't seem like a cop out. I did put the clues about Mike's car being loud in there for you guys on two different occasions, so the evidence was there, albeit very subtle.

So yeah, there we go. Hope you enjoyed the story. Somewhere in the future I might make another fic, showing some of the things from Will/Jessica's POV. In my headcanon, there's some unresolved stuff about Jessica which this would delve into. If there's enough interest about that, I might write it, but it's not my priority. Got loads more Byler stuff (and Reddie too if you're into that). Keep a look out, and as always, thanks for reading!